DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 477 850 CS 511 958

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TITLE	Reading Instruction and State Mandated Testing.
PUB DATE	2003-05-06
NOTE	9p.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Standards; Elementary Secondary Education; Instructional Effectiveness; *Reading Achievement; *Reading Instruction; State Standards; Student Needs; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS	Elementary Secondary Education Act; *No Child Left Behind Act 2001

ABSTRACT

Student scores on state mandated tests, to be given annually in grades 3 through 8 and in grade 10, place reading instruction at the apex of the school curriculum. These standards are inherent in No Child Left Behind, a revision of the federally funded Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Students are to be able to read on the third grade level by the time they are in the third grade. Since there are penalties for both schools and students if a child should fail to meet federal and state guidelines, this paper discusses what teachers and students can do to avoid failing in the reading curriculum. The paper outlines six specific procedures teachers should follow to help their students achieve reading success. It also explains the current reforms in the teaching of reading and describes how a quality reading program should function. Finally, the paper suggests additional ways, other than state-mandated testing, to assess student achievement. Contains 9 references. (NKA)

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Reading Instruction and State Mandated Testing.

by Marlow Ediger

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READING INSTRUCTION AND STATE MANDATED TESTING

Pupil scores on state mandated tests, to be given annually in grades three through eight and in grade ten, place reading instruction at the apex of the school curriculum. These standards are inherent in No Child left Behind, a revision of the federally funded Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Pupils are to be able, also, to read on the third grade level by the time they are in the third grade.

There are penalties if a child should fail to meet federal and state guidelines such as

1. declaring a school bankrupt if test scores are too low. Pupils are permitted to transfer to another school if the local school has low test scores two years in a row and is declared a failing school.
2. students denied high school diplomas if their test scores are below mandated standards in high stakes testing.
3. pupils not being promoted to the next grade level if a test score is too low on a specific grade level.

What can teachers and pupils do to avoid failing in the reading curriculum? (See Smith, 2003).

Success in Reading

There are a plethora of schools of thought in promoting pupil's abilities to read. They vary much from each other in terms of being

1. highly child centered with heavy pupil involvement in making selections of reading materials.
2. heavily scripted with clear specific directions on what the teacher is to do and say in reading instruction.
3. tightly sequenced content for pupil progress and continuous achievement.
4. balanced between pupil versus teacher selection of methods of instruction.
5. local versus state mandated in evaluation efforts.

The teacher needs to study each child carefully to notice which content and methods of instruction best meet the needs of the individual child. Meeting individual needs should assist each learner to achieve more optimally. Thus, the reading teacher needs to use principles of learning from the psychology of education to guide pupil optimal attainment. First, the teacher must study pupils to ascertain what engages learners in the

instructional process. Disengagement will certainly hinder a pupil's progress in reading. To be engaged, the pupil is wholeheartedly involved to securing information. These are goal centered children having in mind the obtaining of salient knowledge. They are not easily disturbed from the act of reading, but rather pursue and follow through in the getting of something worthwhile in the ideas domain.

Second, the teacher needs to assist pupils to seek understanding of subject matter being read. Reading words is not the objective of reading but rather a means to look for meaning. Meaningful reading is not rote learning, nor memorization. It is rather looking for a context in learning. What is learned fits into the larger whole. It blends in with other learnings to increase knowledge into a greater depth. Relationship of ideas is sought when understanding content read. Isolation of subject matter tends to reflect memoriter methods. But meaning might not then be acquired. To enlarge and to relate subject matter read indicates a desire to tie together loose ends of knowing and doing (See Almasi, 2003).

Third, the teacher needs to motivate pupils to achieve, grow, and develop in reading. Reading does not stop with being able to read a book, but needs continuous practice and refinement. Encouragement is involved by the teacher for a child to continue reading good literature. The encouragement is done through rewarding remarks pertaining to better pupil achievement in reading, positive non-verbal communication, suggestions of materials to read, and personal acceptance of the learner. Thus, the teacher shows the child in diverse ways how important it is to read well, including being a role model for the latter. The child then perceives that the act of reading as being good, exciting, enjoyable, and wanted. If the pupil has listened to read alouds pertaining to desirable library books from infancy on in a loving and caring manner, the impressions will not be futile nor forgotten but stored in an inward desire to read. With motivation, cumulative growth in reading is possible.

Fourth, reading generally is not done for the sake of its doing, but rather to fulfill a purpose. Purposes vary from child to child. Thus, what is purposeful for one might not be so for the other. The involved purposes of the child may indeed be complex, but must be fulfilled through seeking and pursuing. These purposes can then be found and fulfilled. A wide variety of genres and reading levels of literature will assist pupils to choose and make appropriate decisions as to what to read. Children individually have goals to pursue as do adults (Ediger and Rao, 2003, Chapter Seven).

Fifth, subject matter read needs to be sequential. What is personally chosen and read might be integrated as being sequential for the reader. He/she then determines order of subject matter read. A psychological curriculum results when the pupil chooses his/her reading materials from those located in the classroom or school library. Toward the other end of the continuum, the teacher in guided reading instruction orders the content for children. Here, the teacher teaches a small group and asks questions covering what he/she deems to be sequential for children being taught. Perhaps, this is a style of learning in that selected children like to order their own subject matter read whereas others benefit more from reading with teacher leadership in guided practice.

Sixth, there are specific ways of appraising pupil achievement. One procedure places much stress upon the pupil largely appraising the self in terms of criteria. This might be in a conference setting in which the pupil with teacher guidance raises questions pertaining to content read and discusses possible answers. Toward the other end of the continuum, the teacher solely raises questions for the reader(s) to answer. The source of the questions comes from an external source, not the pupil. Other external sources, used for evaluation of pupil achievement, are state mandated and standardized tests (Ediger and Rao, 2000, Chapter Twenty).

There are then selected issues in reading instruction which need to be resolved. The answer tends to lie in the direction of under which conditions pupils do best in reading achievement. For example, a continuing issue in reading instruction is phonics versus whole language approaches. Advocated of phonics instruction state their point of view with the following arguments:

There is much consistency between symbol and sound in the English language. Pupils then benefit much from phonics instruction in order to unlock unknown words. Whole language advocates do not perceive that much consistency exists between grapheme and phoneme. Then too, the latter believe that pupils lose out on subject matter learning by focusing too much on symbol and sound relationships.

Reform in the Teaching of Reading

State mandated objectives and assessment advocate stress the importance of specific objectives available for teachers to use in upping pupil achievement. The learning activities chosen by teachers need to align with these state

selected objectives. Measurement needs to be done in terms of the objectives in grades three through eight and grade ten. The total philosophy of state mandated objectives centers around measurability. Frequent testing of pupils provides measurable results pertaining to pupil achievement. A systematic evaluation program is in evidence with school and school systems results from testing being published and noted in the media. Competition is inherent in that one school is pitted against the other(s). The focus of statewide testing is on reading and mathematics largely. Later, other academic areas will be added. If a school is labeled as failing, the involved pupil with parental guidance may choose a different school for the child to attend.

All pupils are to achieve the same objectives in the same amount of time; the same test is used to measure achievement of all pupils. Then too, equity in test results is a major objective. Thus all pupils are to score high on the state mandated tests with gaps being closed among divers kinds of majority and minority groups in school. Pupils of the same/similar chronological age are to be taught together in one classroom. A teacher teaches one set of same age pupils for one year; then a new set of same age pupils are there for the teacher teach next school year. Advocates believe that testing with state mandated tests is the major way of assessment to ascertain what pupils have learned. What pupils know can be tested. Objectivity is stressed here, internal items such as attitudes, feelings, and appreciations, do not exist, unless they can be measured. What is linguistic and can be said or written count. The fine arts, for example, such as music, visual and performing art, as well as the practical arts, do not contain that which can be measured. Machine scoring of test sheets responded to by pupils make it possible to score mass numbers of tests in a short time. Printouts of test results might then show indicators of progress such a percentiles, grade equivalents, means, and medians, among other statistical data for teachers to use in decision making. Measurement philosophies are based on stimulus - response theories of learning (S - R). Stimulus -- Response theory has rather limited use in the pupil's personal life in school and in society. Developing generalizations, critical and creative thinking, as well as problem solving do not tend to adhere to or come under the heading of S - R theory (See Eisner).

A Quality Reading Program

Pupils truly do need to experience quality in reading instruction to do the very best possible on state mandated

tests. There are selected recommendations which may be made here to assist pupils to achieve, grow, and develop in reading instruction. First, the program of reading instruction adopted should harmonize with the child's favorite way of learning. If a child tends to be holistic, there are certain reading programs which might be emphasized such as the Big Book approach, individualized reading, and the experience chart (also called the language experience approach). Other readers may be more formal in their likes and benefit from a phonics oriented procedure of instruction. The scope and sequence of reading instruction may then be heavily endowed with phonetic analysis instruction. In-between procedures of reading instruction might well be the use of basal readers with their accompanying manuals. There can then be teacher directed reading instruction as well as pupil purposes may be enlisted. The teacher needs to continually study pupil behavior to ascertain under which conditions pupils do best in reading. This is certainly not an easy task since each pupil is a very complex being. Pupils need an approach which will assist in learning to read well and achieving state mandated objectives of instruction (See Piro, 2002).

Second, the sequence of learning activities in reading instruction might be very open ended or closed. Thus, pupils might benefit from a sequence which is controlled by the learner as compared to external others. A learning centers philosophy might stress this open ended approach. Here, the teacher needs to set up an adequate number of centers so that a pupil might truly select, as well as omit, library books to read. Each center may have a title such as the following

1. animal stories
2. adventure stories
3. stories about nature
4. stories about children of other lands
5. poetry on diverse topics

Each center has library books on diverse reading levels. Pupils may select the order or sequence of books to be read. A short conference with the teacher might follow, periodically, to evaluate achievement in word recognition and comprehension. The sequence of library books to read is completely open ended and involves pupil choice (See Hoyt, et al,).

Toward the other end of the curriculum, the reading program might indicate a tight or closed sequence. In programmed reading, for example, be it in textbook form or computerized program, the sequence has been determined completely by the

programmer. If a program deals with phonics, the programmer has broken down the contents in terms of very small sequential steps of learning, progressing from the easiest to the gradually more complex learnings. Good programs have been field tested with a given set of pupils in several pilot studies. Thus a pupil

1. reads a small amount of information
2. responds to a test item covering content read
3. checks his/her answer with that provided by the programer.

If the pupil responded correctly, he/she is ready to move on to the next sequential programed item. If the learner responded incorrectly, he/she has seen the correct answer and is still ready to respond to the next programed item. Programed learning moves forward in very small steps. Each preceding programed item provides readiness for the next ordered item of learning. Responding correctly is necessary before moving on to the next ordered sequential programmed item. Pupils individually are to make very few errors in sequential learning. What to learn (objectives of instruction), learning activities for pupils to achieve the objectives, and assessment (the answers to each programmed item), have been determined by the programer or writer of the reading matter.

Thus, the reading program selected must pay attention to the conditions which make the best sequence possible for each pupil, be it open ended or tightly knit.

Third, quality evaluation is important to notice pupil achievement in reading and also to diagnose and remedy deficiencies. State mandated testing is one way of evaluation, but it does not assess continuously. Testing once a year, on grades three through eight and grade ten, is not adequate in the total assessment process. There are a plethora of other and additional times when a pupil's achievement needs evaluation. Better evaluation in terms of quality criteria makes it so that the teacher can provide optimal sequential experiences for pupils. The following are additional ways, other than state mandated testing, to assess pupil achievement

1. teacher observation which can be done almost continuously.
2. teacher written test items, covering content taught in reading.
3. self appraisal by the pupil in terms of quality criteria.
4. pupils individually, with teacher assistance, developing a portfolio covering vital documents involving personal reading achievement and progress items.

5. cassettes and video tapes of pupil achievement within the framework of doing committee and group work (Ediger and Rao, 2003, Chapter Eight).

A variety of learning activities directly related to objectives of instruction should assist each pupil to do better work in the classroom and toward doing well on state mandated objectives, in the area of reading.

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